

Self and Group: Dynamics of Reflection in Student-to-Student Feedback

Andrew Tyner

ABSTRACT

Over the course of one semester, I kept a teaching journal in which I reflected on my teaching practices as well as holistic student performance, with a particular focus on post-discussion feedback sections. Using the first seven weeks of this information, which were completed at the time of writing, I examined the post-discussion student-to-student feedback stages of one of my English discussion classes. I found that the students not only successfully completed the intended feedback sections, but exceeded expectations in several ways including the scope of content addressed, the nature of the feedback provided, and the speed with which the activity was completed.

INTRODUCTION

The English discussion lesson at Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) consists of sections intended, respectively, to introduce target language skills, provide adequate practice using said skills, and finally, allow for extended production through a two-part production stage, in which students demonstrate their ability to employ the language skills within two separate discussions. The feedback stages which follow the first and second discussion are of particularly significant importance, as they directly address the strengths and weaknesses of student skill use during the stages in which students are generally most able to clearly demonstrate their mastery of skills or lack thereof. Further, the feedback stages allow opportunities for students to determine precisely how to improve their performance in subsequent discussions. The EDC curriculum is strongly unified, however, because each instructor may choose the particulars of how to conduct these feedback sections, any one instructor's methodology is, I think, a subject worthy of consideration.

The self-reflective student-to-student feedback section of my lessons has been, at least in my subjective opinion, one of the most useful and effective portions of my lessons thus far. Each feedback section is two minutes in duration and consists primarily of students reporting either to a peer or a small group, depending on class size and the level, at least one specific strong point and one weak point with regard to skill use or non-use in the preceding discussion, with each point accompanied by explanation of what they did or did not do well. This is followed by a specific skill-related goal. While "strong" and "weak" may seem to imply subjective judgements about the quality of one's speaking, the focus is, almost exclusively, on skill use or non-use. For instance, a student could begin their feedback by saying something to the effect of, "My strong point was checking for more ideas. I asked, 'Is there anything to add?' several times in the discussion." This type of specific feedback is modeled in the first weeks of the course, and the importance of being specific is emphasized each week prior to feedback.

Specificity is key. Some students, in the first week of the semester, will invariably try feedback along the lines of, "I didn't speak well...I want to speak well." As it is vague and not immediately actionable, this type of feedback is of very little value, so students are reminded that the points all must be specific. To aid in this, students are advised to use a complete skill list, which is provided at the back of the textbook. This type of specificity of focus has been cited as a factor in improving the quality of student feedback in various articles, including Denton (2018),

who emphasizes, for example, the need to “identify a specific problem” and to “*explain why* it is a problem” (p. 22). Donovan (2015) notes self-reflection, particularly that which is focused on goals, as an avenue to greater insight and control. In the case of a given discussion, this control would pertain to when and how to best use a given language skill, in other words, more competent and fluent use of language skills.

By requiring the students to report their self-reflection feedback information to their peers, they are, as a logical consequence, required to fully formulate specific considerations of strengths and weaknesses within their own minds. Further, the students, when listening to such reports, are called, once again, to consider the skills at hand. As with peer feedback, more generally, the goal is “enhancing engagement and developing evaluative competencies” (Xu & Carless, 2017, p.1084).

This entirely student-centered phase is followed by a brief teacher-student phase of feedback in which I validate and, if appropriate, elaborate on ideas from the student-student section. My feedback is limited to around three distinct points and balanced between praise and criticism. While I often acknowledge or reference the content of the students’ discussions, the teacher-fronted section of the feedback is focused on skill use or non-use. Often, both student-stated strong and weak points demonstrate a very strong correlation with the points I have noted in my assessment notes, which are used both for providing in-class and online post-class feedback as well as grading.

The student-to-student feedback is primarily self-reflective with the intention of fostering cognizance of one’s own skill use or non-use in order to promote both better in-discussion skill use as well as skill automatization through consistent, repeated use. Further, it is meant to mitigate the sense of social pressure students may feel in situations of peer assessment. As Guyer (2012) notes, “socially anxious adolescents” experience marked and continuing neurophysiological effects from “peer rejection,” rejection being a very possible perception of critical peer feedback.

In addition, the multi-step approach to feedback, incorporating self-reflection, as well as student-to-student and teacher-student feedback addresses the conflicting research that suggests on one hand, as noted by Murillo-Zamorano (2018), in certain circumstances peer assessment may be of more benefit than receiving feedback directly from an instructor. On the other hand, “DeGrez, Valcke and Roozen detected greater improvement when the feedback comes from experts (13%) than when provided by the student’s peers themselves (7.5%) while self-assessment brought hardly any improvement (0.2%)” (Murillo-Zamorano & Montanero, 2018, p.141).

I have been very pleased with the apparent positive effects of the student-to-student feedback portions of my lessons. However, it seems worthwhile, particularly in light of the conflicting evidence with regard to what type of feedback is most effective, and the comparative lack of research on self-reflection as a component of feedback, to examine this section of the lesson in more depth, particularly from the perspective of in-class student performance.

With an eye toward this goal, over the course of one semester, I maintained a journal covering my teaching and the student performance within one class which I felt to be representative of the majority of my EDC classes in terms of number of students (8), skill level (intermediate), and overall demeanor (generally positive). The journal consisted primarily of a handwritten outline of student performance at the various lesson stages accompanied by questions and comments related to points which I felt warranted greater scrutiny going forward. It was written as soon as possible after class, usually immediately following the class, and each entry took approximately five minutes to complete. Some very brief notes, chiefly those related to specific timing (i.e., the specific duration of a portion of the feedback section) were completed during class time. It is from the first seven weeks of this journal, completed at the time of writing, that I draw the examples which shall be used in the following discussion.

DISCUSSION

In the first observed class, the first comments I wrote under the section heading for student-to-student feedback was, “focused, clear, and correct.” In other words, the students had achieved the basic goals of clearly and concisely stating their strong points, weak points, and goals while adhering to the strictures of the feedback format (i.e., restricting focus to distinct discussion and communication skills). This type of positive initial comment was repeated throughout virtually all of the classes recorded in my teaching journal. However, to say that my intended feedback format succeeded entirely *as intended* would not be correct.

One initial concern noted in my journal was that the students may demonstrate a drop-off in performance, perhaps as a result of apathy, as the feedback section format was repetitive, indeed, unchanging. While I had successfully used the feedback format in question throughout the previous semester, my primary concern was the potential degradation of the format over time, perhaps as students grew to overlook some aspects of the feedback. Simply put, this did not occur. I believe the challenge of self-assessment, as the body of skills being assessed continually grew throughout the semester, was sufficient to maintain student interest and engagement. In fact, the students so internalized the format of the feedback section that they could complete it more efficiently than expected. In fact, without exception, the students consistently performed their feedback tasks in a manner encompassing the intended goals. Further, they exceeded those goals in three notable ways.

I.

In the first observed week, I noted that after all students in each group finished the intended feedback (as this class performed student-student feedback in groups as opposed to pairs) they continued by drawing group-level conclusions about their performance and agreeing upon a group-level goal for the second discussion. In this case they assessed that they spoke at too great a length about some points in their discussion and that they should be more mindful of timing to allow a greater opportunity for more extensive use of the lesson’s target discussion skills. In other words, they had begun to take on part of the same role that I assume, validator of feedback, particularly on the group level. The students were able not only to assess their own performance, but to acknowledge both positive and negative patterns in their group-level skill use. I could still validate their validation, as it were. However, they had demonstrated a greater level of focus on group performance than anticipated in the initial format of the feedback. This is particularly encouraging in the light of some academic findings. Li (2010) found, for instance, that while the quality of feedback from one’s peers had no “direct link” to the quality of the recipient student’s work, “the quality of feedback...correlated positively with the quality [of work done by the student in the role of assessor]” (p.534). The act of taking on the role of assessor may, in and of itself, confer some benefit, particularly when the feedback provided is of high quality.

Rather than alter the feedback structure, I decided to proceed with the feedback instructions unchanged. While I did not discourage any changes to the format on the part of students who had already successfully completed what might be called the standard portion of the feedback, I only indirectly encouraged such changes as noted above by validating the points they made and by noting the quality of the points they raised. My intention was two-fold. First, if students successfully completed the activity as initially instructed, then they were satisfying what I perceived as the most essential criterion of the self-assessment, namely, an active cognizance of their own performance in light of skill use or non-use. Second, by neither restricting nor actively encouraging the manner in which students might exceed the basic feedback, they could use the allotted time in an organic way, in the way they best saw fit. As their initial variation had been

positive, I had no reason to suspect future variations would be negative, with the worst-case scenario being a need for some in-activity feedback from me to correct the course of the feedback.

II.

The next week, just above half the students were in attendance, perhaps due to inclement weather. The students were rather low-energy. My notes reflect that they needed to ask one another questions to get through their strong points, weak points, and goals in a timely manner, rather than simply reporting them in sequence as they had done previously. Yet, to my surprise, they found the time and energy to report on group-level strong points after the first discussion, and, after the second discussion, they agreed upon group-level strong points, weak points, and goals. What may be of note here is that they, according to my notes from the day, “*specifically balanced both positivity and criticism*” in self-validating their feedback, in identifying group-level positive and negative trends emergent from skill use or non-use on the part of group members.

In this case, I noted that one group, for instance, positively acknowledged their thorough efforts to use a certain skill, which had been covered in a past lesson, many times in spite of the fact that some members of the group forgot to use said skills as a result of a prioritized focus on language skills that were the focus of the current day’s lesson. In other words, they expanded beyond the self-reflective strength, weakness, goal, structure of the feedback and began, organically, to seek balance between praise and criticism in their group-level feedback. It should also be noted that this was not done by a single student taking on a leadership role, rather, it was done jointly, with all members of both groups contributing to their respective group’s group-level feedback. This behavior continued with only one or two single-group exceptions throughout the observed period. The exceptions were, seemingly, time related. In these cases, groups simply ran out of time before this stage could be reached.

This balanced approach demonstrates a more nuanced analysis of group-level performance, and feedback that may be of greater value than solely critical group-level feedback. As Patchan (2016) notes, there is some evidence that, with respect to peer feedback, among “college students...praise may help build trust” (p. 1099), trust being an element beneficial to the overall group dynamic. Further, from a more immediately pragmatic standpoint, “learners of all ages may not repeat what was done well in the future if they do not know what was specifically done well in the first place” (Patchan, 2016, p. 1099). While the basic feedback format addresses this through the reporting of at least one ‘strong point,’ this same sort of specific positive feedback at the groups level may further reinforce positive skill use while maintaining a very positive group dynamic.

III.

The last point of particular note concerns speed of feedback completion. As we progressed through the semester, and as the students became more and more familiar with the feedback format, their speed increased noticeably. Looking back over the notes, the students consistently finished 20-50 seconds early. In past classes, and indeed in some other classes, I would stop the timer and proceed with the next part of the feedback. However, in the observed class (and in many other classes that showed a similar leaning in performance to the observed class), I would simply urge them to continue or wait silently for them to do so. It was primarily in this time that the student-to-student group-level feedback and meta-analysis of skill performance took place. The students consistently took advantage of this time.

The speed of completion is notable in two respects. It demonstrates, first, a growing self-awareness of performance on the part of the students allowing for more rapid, though still thorough completion of the self-reflective feedback. This is the very self-awareness intended in

implementing the current feedback format. Indeed, a high speed of completion is, itself, arguably a partial proof of the success of the approach. Second, the speed of completion of the feedback section opens up a bit of time, from a logistical viewpoint, to allow for additions to the feedback format of the very sort carried out by the observed class of their own volition.

CONCLUSION

The students demonstrated not only the effectiveness of the feedback system currently employed in my English classes, but also the ability to exceed the limits of the current format. Should a group-level component be added in future classes? It remains a matter for consideration, and each class is a case unto itself, but I think, perhaps, it would be better to proceed without such a component.

The most important consideration before changing the current format is the motivation to do so. Is there a *need* for such a change? If the goal of the feedback stage is, as I said before, an active cognizance of one's own performance in light of skill use or non-use, then group-level dynamics, while worthy of consideration and a good use of excess time, are of secondary concern.

Further, Holen (2000) notes that, "[g]roups in ostensibly similar settings are sometimes very different...Generally, the goals and size of the group, as well as the propensities of its members, will determine what dynamics best serve its interests" (p.486). The fact that one class exceed expectations for feedback in a particular way does not necessarily imply that one should *expect* the same choice from every class. I have the greatest confidence in all of my students to excel, but with differing ability levels, and, in particular, different group dynamics, this excellence may take differing forms. Allowing the remaining time, if any, within the student-student feedback section to be used organically seems the best approach, as long as the time is used constructively.

While I have not kept a journal on all of my classes, I can easily recollect numerous instances in which other, non-observed, classes followed a pattern virtually identical to the one noted above. In others, however, upon completion of feedback, the group might turn to discussion of strategy, of how to better implement certain skills. In still other classes, the remaining time may be used to offer advice to a group-mate who is struggling to use a skill correctly or thoroughly. In some classes, however, the groups need all of the time to complete the primary section, while in others, the group members may habitually fall silent after completion of the primary portion, calling for teacher intervention to avoid a waste of time. In short, there is no one formula for how best to use excess feedback time. The group dynamics and the proclivities of individual students are always different. However, in *allowing* excess time to be used in meaningful ways, I find that it most often is used to the benefit of the students involved.

The in-class evidence speaks most clearly to the value of the system of self-reflective student-student feedback I currently employ, and the general direction in second-language education seems to be away from a teacher-fronted, top-down classroom environment in favor of student engagement (Xu & Carless, 2017). However, it is still noted by some that with regard to student perception, teacher-fronted feedback is perceived as being of a higher quality (Harland, et al., 2017). As my current multi-stage system, through the incorporation of a teacher-student section, attempts to mitigate such concerns, the overall format of the feedback seems in line with current trends and best-practices, while addressing the issue of student perception of feedback quality.

Xu (2011) notes that the "tendency to engage in self-reflection seems logically related to [one's] level of cognitive control and regulation." (p.42). Self-reflection, particularly in conjunction with other forms of feedback, provides a robust system by which students may gauge their performance and pursue improvement. While this paper addresses some of the observed strengths of one iteration of self-reflective feedback, a wider-scale examination of this type of

feedback may well be in order.

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